

First Impression

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Summary: Jude's first impression of Gaius.

First Impression

Warnings: Random plot, an attempt at light humor, shounen-ai

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Summary: Gaius's first impression leaves a mark on Jude.

* * *

><p>Mon Highlandsâ€" <p>

They ran as fast as they could through the freezing snow and ice. The low temperature had seeped through their clothes instantly once they had escaped from Gaius Castle. Jude could feel his nose beginning to numb from overexposure but they had to keep moving. Auj Oule soldiers could be closing in on them.

"Ah!"

The high squeak of Elize's voice made Jude stop running and turn back to their youngest member. She had fallen in the snow. She had face-planted into the hard packed snow and left a slight impression as she picked herself up.

"Are you okay Elize?", Jude rushed to her side along with the others.

"I-I'm f-f-fine", her teeth clacked together as she answered. Minus the bright redness of her skin from the cold wind, she appeared ok.

"Here, climb on my back. I'll carry you the rest of the way", Jude offered as he turned around and crouched down.

"N-no. I-I-I can m-make i-it", she chattered. She clutched Teepo closer and stood up on shaky legs.

"Miss Elize, I insist that you take Jude's offer. We don't want you to collapse from exhaustion in this weather. You will be warmer and can get some rest", Rowen told her gently.

Elize hesitated for a second before giving a shaky nod. She climbed onto Jude's back, Teepo floating quietly beside them. Jude felt her small hands clutch his shoulders for support and he carefully hooked his arms under her knees.

Their small group set off again, carefully navigating around prowling monsters hunting in the area and keeping a good pace back to Xian Du. Milla led the way with Leia while Jude followed behind and Rowen covered the rear.

The Dargo Subterranean Passage back to Xian Du was a welcomed sight to the weary and half-frozen group.

"Elize, are you okay?", Jude asked once they entered the passage.

"I'm fine", she whispered over his left shoulder.

The enveloping warmth encouraged their growing fatigue and sluggish pace. Jude felt his aches and pains from the fight against Wingul and Presa slowing him down. The fight had been brutal. If it weren't for their healing artes, especially Elize's, they would have been captured or killed by the duo. He did not want to collapse until they were safe inside Xian Du's walls.

Elize was light for her age, but with her soaked clothes, Jude's arms were starting to cramp from being cold and stiff.

"I'm f-f-freezing. I want hot chocolate or hot soup to warm me up!", Teepo moaned miserably.

"Let's head for the inn. We need to rest before we move on. Let's hope Gaius does not issue a notice for our capture in the meantime", Rowen suggested to which everyone agreed.

Jude turned his head to look over his shoulder, "Are you okay to walk now Elize?"

"Y-yes", she nodded quickly, her cheeks flushing a faint red from being so close to his face. Jude carefully set her back on to her feet. She began to wring her cold fingers in nervousness while Jude checked her over, mistaking her blush for illness. Teepo floated around them in lazy circles, grinning mischievously.

Once Jude was reassured that Elize was fine, the group headed for the inn. Leia tried chatting about random thoughts that popped in her head but only Rowen readily engaged her. Jude was wrapped up in his thoughts.

'_Were we too naïve in asking for Gaius's help?_'

'_He seemed more intent on acquiring the Lance of Kresnik than destroying it. He wanted to capture Milla too, but why?_'

"Jude", Milla's voice brought him out of his musing. He looked around and noticed they were out of the passage and back in Xian Du.

They did not go unnoticed either.

"How was your audience with the King?", Yurgen's voice spoke over the hum of the crowded street as the tribesman approached them. His face showed open curiosity as he looked at each of them.

Jude glanced at Milla. Her calm magenta eyes met his wary amber ones. She gave him a small nod and looked back to Yurgen.

"It went well enough. We wish to rest up before departing tomorrow. Is that alright?", she asked.

Yurgen nodded, "I see no trouble with that. Will you be staying at the inn?"

"I don't see why we should. The King has his men hot on ourâ€", Teepo was muffled towards the end by Jude while Rowen stepped politely in front to shield the talkative doll.

"Ummâ€|okay?", Yurgen looked unsure with how to continue the now awkward conversation.

"No need to rush off yet", a laid back voice said from behind the group.

Jude felt his heart jump with panic as he glared at the slowly approaching man.

"Alvin", Jude murmured. The man waved in greeting like his betrayal at Gaius Castle had _not_ happened.

"_They're_ on a wild-geese chase in the mountains right about now", He stopped a few feet away from them.

"You threw them off our trail?", Milla stepped forward, folding her arm across her chest. "Is this some kind of peace offering?"

Alvin held his hands up in a placating gesture, "Huh? It's only natural that I help you. We're friends, right?"

Jude wanted to scoff but he held back. Silence met Alvin's question.

"Come on, you don't believe me?", he somehow added a bit of hurt in his voice.

Alvin walked past Milla and Elize to stand next to Jude. He slug a friendly over Jude's shoulder even though the shorter man refused to acknowledge him.

"Would it kill you to give me another shot?", the question was directed at Jude.

Jude wanted to refuse. He wanted to deny Alvin's attempts to be their friend, but, his traitorous heart could not look past the sense of genuineness he thought he heard in Alvin's plea.

Jude hung his head as he muttered, "I-I guess not."

"Attaboy", Alvin said happily.

Elize stuck close to Leia, "Welcome back. I'm glad that you're safe". If her greeting sounded cold, no one faulted her for it. Even Teepo showed her displeasure of seeing Alvin back among them.

Alvin chuckled, "Thanks. You almost sound sincere."

"If nothing else", Rowen injected neutrally, "it seems that Alvin has bought us some time."

Yurgen sighed, "I'd ask what's going on, but I honestly don't want to know. You people sure have a lot of drama in your lives."

"I'll meet you all in the front of the wyverns when you are ready to fly. Have a good day."

The group watched as Yurgen left them.

"It's finally time.", Jude heard Milla say softly.

Jude turned to her with a small smile. "Let's go get our rooms. I wonder if the chef will let me cook our dinner tonight. We wouldn't want another Exodus incident before we get to Rashugal."

"Yes", Milla nodded while Leia chirped, "You said it!"

Rowen hummed before saying, "I'll make the after dinner tea then. A nice brew to help settle us for the night."

"We'll saddle up as soon as we are ready tomorrow", said Jude. They all started walking to the inn, Alvin leading them.

As they approached the stairs, Alvin stretched dramatically, "Great idea. I'm beat and could sure use one of Jude's special stews."

Jude stopped, "Wait, hold up." The others stopped around him and Alvin paused but did not turn around.

Jude didn't speak further, his silence and piercing stare drilling into the back of Alvin's head until the older man sighed and rubbed a hand through his hair.

"Still having doubts about me, huh?", he asked quietly. He turned around, "And, it looks like you aren't the only one."

He waved a hand nonchalantly, "Fine, fine. Remember the first time the three of us went to Nia Khera, and I went off by myself?"

"The time that I came out of my shrine and Jude was the only one there?", Milla questioned him.

"Yeah", Alvin nodded. "I was off meeting with Wingul."

Rowen cut in, "So you had a secret arrangement with them. To hand Milla over if she became a problem?"

"How could you!? Stabbing Milla and Jude in the back like that.", Leia gave voice to her growing disapproval and disappointment of Alvin.

"Hold it!", Alvin said a little loudly to stop any further interruptions.

"Yeah, I was working a few different angles back then, but this time I was using that to our advantage. You know, the only reason we were given permission to use the wyverns is because I arranged that with them ahead of time."

"Waitâ€¦|So when you betrayed us in front of Gaiusâ€¦|", Elize trailed off.

Alvin nodded, "You got it. If I hadn't pretended to betray you there, they never would have let us ride the wyverns. That's why I lied and told them you ran in the opposite direction of Xian Du."

Jude bowed his head; he still felt conflicted even with Alvin's explanation. "I want to believe you, but I can't. Not yet."

Milla shifted into a contemplative stance, "That reminds me. The woman, Presa, who we met at Kijara Seafalls. It seemed like you already knew her."

Alvin shifted awkwardly and a pained look passed over his face. He looked at Milla with some resignation, "What do you want to know?"

"Who is she, really?", Jude asked.

Alvin hesitated too long in answering.

Jude snapped, "How can we trust you if you keep hiding information from us?!"

"All right, calm down. No need to get snappy", Alvin grimaced.

Jude ignored him, "Do you even know what you are putting us through?"

A moment of silence.

"I met her when I was working for Rashugal's Intelligence service. At the time, she was an Auj Oule secret agent working undercover in Fennmont. After that we became moreâ€¦|personally involved. You probably don't want to know the specifics."

Jude shook his head, "Fine, I believe you. Though, I still don't trust you."

"Heh, you're so cute when you're upset", Alvin joked.

Jude didn't see anything funny, "Stop that! I'm still mad at you!"

"Alvin, may I ask you one last thing?", Milla butted in while Alvin placated Jude.

"Go ahead"

"Tell us why you're helping us. What's in it for you?", she asked.

"You're asking that now?", Alvin looked incredulous. "Because I love the hell out of you guys, of course!", he said enthusiastically.

Stunned silence met his boisterous reply. Teepo was the first to recover.

"More lies!"

Alvin gave a look of pseudo-hurt, "How could you even think that? I'm hurt!"

"Riiight", Jude sighed. He felt his exhaustion return tenfold and started for inn again. The others followed.

They were approaching the front desk when Milla collapsed to one knee, a gasp of pain escaping her mouth.

Rowen was able to secure them two rooms for the night while Jude tended to Milla. Lucky for them, the inn's cooking staff had no problem with Jude using their kitchen. He prepared a simply meal of beef stew and butter rolls. He made a mental note to pick up more supplies in the morning.

The group ate their meal in relative silence, sometimes broken by Teepo harassing Alvin. Elize didn't try to reign her doll in and Leia occasionally threw in with a few comments of her own.

Jude ate his meal methodically, lost in his thoughts about the recent events.

Meeting the King of Auj Oule had not gone as they had hoped.

'_What was I hoping for? Or expecting?_'_

He had been surprised when Gaius had appeared. The king towered over nearly everyone in the throne room, except for Jiao. His formal clothes did not hide the cut and trim of his strong physique. His ebony hair hung loosely about his face, enhancing the intensity of his stare.

Jude felt mildly embarrassed about his lack of control when Gaius's eyes landed on him. He had managed to stifle his body's urge to flinch. It was his mouth that betrayed him by dropping open in a quiet gasp of surprise.

The king's stare then shifted to Milla and Jude had felt as if he could breathe again.

He chalked up his weird reaction to the overwhelming presence Gaius gave off unconsciously.

From there, brief introductions had been made. There were no pleasantries; just straight to business.

Thinking back, Jude realized it was rude of him to accuse Gaius's country of creating the booster technology that Rashugal now took advantage of.

Gaius's indifference to the accusation had stunned and cowed him into silence. Leia, spirits bless her, had stepped up to vaguely explain their plans of dealing with the Lance of Kresnik. Without it, Rashugal wasn't a threat to Auj Oule and war could be avoided. She had hesitantly asked for the king's assistance with their endeavor.

No response from Gaius. Wingul asked curtly if they had any other concerns.

After a moment of silence, Rowen brought up the issue of the Labari Hollow laboratory. Milla asked directly if Auj Oule had any part in the abductions of the orphans used in the laboratory's experiments.

Jude had seen the flicker of surprise on Gaius's face from Milla's directness. Gaius let out a patient sigh before asking about her concern for the issue.

Milla told the king what Jude, Rowen, Leia, Elize and Alvin had heard before: She is Maxwell, protector of spirits and humans.

Gaius had looked slightly amused by her declaration and even said so.

Milla had not backed down from his nonchalant comment. She asked again if Gaius had any part in the experiments conducted in his country.

To Jude's surprise, Wingul claimed responsibility for sanctioning and even participated in the booster experiments.

The meeting had gone downhill from there. Gaius stated his ideals for the leadership of Auj Oule, Milla refused to give up the 'key', and Alvin betrayed them.

Presa's news of Rashugal's attack on Hamil felt like the final straw. The added evidence of a summoned Great Spirit worsened the situation.

Jude had stood witness as Gaius declared war against Rashugal. He could still hear Wingul's order for Milla and Elize's capture as they fled Gaius Castle.

"Hey! You okay there kid?", the hand dropped on his shoulder disrupted his thoughts.

Jude looked up to see Alvin leaning over him. He looked around and noticed everyone else had left the table. Cheeks flushed, Jude nodded and got up to follow the older man.

The view of Alvin's back brought up fresh memories of him walking

away; to go to a secret meeting, to send 'work' messages, when he betrayed them to Gaius and Wingul.

All the signs had been there. Alvin's suspicious generosity when they first met in Fennmont. Disappearing in Nia Khera to meet with Gaius. The constant notes he would send with the sylphjay. Even if he did throw their pursuers off their trail, Jude's uneasy feeling wouldn't go away.

He followed after Alvin; his thoughts wandering again.

The Lance of Kresnik threatened all of Rieze Maxia, not just Augoule. As a giant spyrix, it has the potential to kill many spirits. Even the Four Great Spirits.

'_Gaius wants to possess the Lance instead of destroying it. What kind of resolution is that? '_

Milla had made several good points during their meeting.

Gaius believes people can have fulfilling lives if they follow a noble path; never straying from it. Milla believes in humankind as well, but, she understands the hidden desires that can cloud a person's judgement. Not everyone is like them. The possibility of Gaius's successor inheriting the Lance and being unable to resist its destructive power was too high.

Rumors about Gaius were also being steadily proven. Which did not bode well for them if they continued to cross paths against him.

Jude groaned as they entered their shared room.

"Oh dear, a gald for your thoughts Jude?", Jude looked up at Rowen's concerned voice.

The older man was already dressed for bed; his gray hair neatly braided into a single braid, hanging over his shoulder.

"Thanks Rowen but I'm fine", Jude brushed off the scrutiny and went to the bed he picked.

"Hold it kid. You've been like this even during dinner. If it's about the recent events then stop. You'll just get a headache and won't be any use to us tomorrow", Alvin shook his head exasperatedly.

Jude huffed in annoyance, slipping his clothes off for a quick bath. "I'm just curious about what type of person Gaius is. He'sâ€|similar to Milla. I get a familiar sense from him like I do her."

"Hm, in terms of conviction, then yes; they are quite similar. Gaius's ideals for his people is admirable. Unfortunately, his plans for the Lance puts our groups in direct conflict", Rowen put a contemplative hand under his chin.

"He sure does have a way of intimidating people. I freeze up every time I see him. It's like being in the presence of an ice dragon", Alvin's careless shrug did not match his words.

"Why an ice dragon? I think he fits the image of a strong king. He's

not bad looking either", Jude mumbled as he entered their attached bathroom.

Choking noises made Jude look back with concern. Alvin's face was twisted as if he was constipated, except, for the twitching smile he was trying to hide.

"My my, a curious observation. Gaius is a handsome man. At his age, he stills looks to be in his twenties. That strong physique, piercing eyes, his mysterious aura—I've heard rumors about long lines of women waiting at the castle to propose to him", Rowen's pleased expression made Jude uneasy.

"And our little boy Jude might end up joining them", Alvin chuckled.

Jude nearly pitched over when he heard that, "What!? I just said he's not bad looking; not that I was interested in him!"

"Aww, Jude has a crush", Jude squashed the urge to punch Alvin for his cheekiness.

"I do not have a crush on Gaius!", Jude exclaimed before slamming the bathroom door.

* * *

><p>Finished~ I hoped you enjoyed it.<p>

End
file.